

9. The Tzeltal

ALFONSO VILLA ROJAS

- 131  OCCUPYING A REGION east of the Tzotzil, the Tzeltal live in the central part of the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Three natural zones divide this land: gentle slopes and plains in the south (Amatenango del Valle, Aguacatenango, Pinola, Soyatitan, and Socoltenango); high peaks and irregular terrain in the central part (Chanal, Oxchuc, Tenejapa, Cancuc, Abasolo, and Tenango); lower peaks toward the north.
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GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

- 13 Vegetation varies with climate and altitude. In the temperate or cold lands, evergreen oaks and pines predominate; in the lower and warm areas are high evergreen forests, alternating with savannas and subdeciduous forest (F. Miranda, 1952, vol. 1, ch. 3). In the temperate and the warm zones coffee and a great variety of fruit trees—orange, annona, peach—are cultivated.
- 133 [245] Few rivers of any volume cross the mountainous terrain. None are navigable. The hydrographic system is delimited by the Usmacinta and Grijalva rivers; the former
- [487]

[P.195-A]

POTTERY MAKING

dark gray in colour, with a considerable admixture of fine limestone gravel. As far as could be ascertained, the mixture is worked without other preparation than that of dampening it to a good consistency. 323

The actual pottery making, *hutsul ya pas ōcom*, ("I am making a cooking pot"), which is done by the women, was observed at Sivacá. Some of the men of the village had worked for us at Toniná, and they, particularly the heavy set one on the extreme right of the picture (fig. 297), a cheerful and very thirsty fellow, remembered me as a friend. A few poor jokes and a handful of cigarettes won the men over, so that the visit became less an investigation than a triumphal tour, escorted by the whole male population, the Alcalde leading, in and out through the village. It really was very good fun. We wound our way among the huts, seeking the 323 123

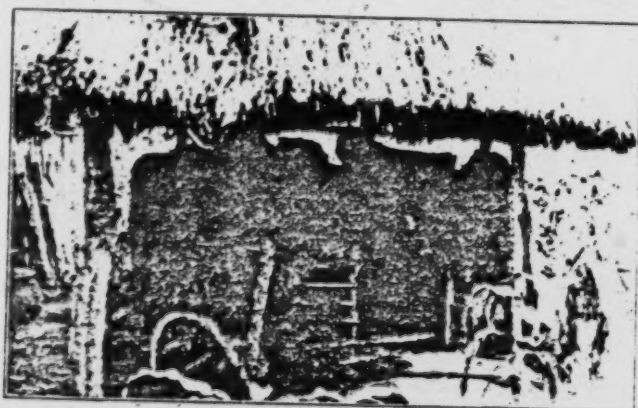


FIG. 296—Tenango, Chi. Close-up of Sweat House. 343

shade wherever possible, scuffling up a good deal of dust, now and then tripping over a pig or a dog. Whenever we came to an orange tree, someone would climb it, to come down with a handful of little, green fruits, so poisonous to look at, and so very sweet and refreshing to eat. They dragged out specimens of all their pottery, and at last lead me with some pomp to a house in which a woman was at work. The good wife did not in the least understand this visit, and was not at all sure that she liked it. All the men clamoured at her at once, telling her to come out and be photographed. Finally she brought her clay and unbaked pots, setting all in the sun, still a little bit afraid that this meant some new Ladino imposition. She set to work as though finding some relief from her embarrassment in the occupation. 323 123 [245] [26]

133 green wall away to the westward. Midway, there is a break in the
slope, with a dramatic splash of deep red cliffs, in violent contrast
241 to the fertile grass and soft tones of the limestone outcrops. Only
the upper end of this valley belongs to Tenango, so little, in fact
that the inhabitants cannot practice the usual, sprawling milpa sys-
[351] tem of agriculture. The very yards are planted, and the fields
[417] start almost in the village, radiating from it in a close patchwork
as in Europe. Everything is fenced with roughly split planks set
on end, and fences line the road into Tenango where it passes
361 through the cornfields. The houses with their yards lie close about
an open plaza in which are the grey bones of a ruined church, a



FIG. 812—Tenango, Chis. Houses.

361 whitewashed, palm-roofed native one, and the shack of a Cabildo for
• 245 the Maestro. The streets are lined with useful trees, oranges, gourds,
363 and a few bananas, which do poorly at this altitude.

342 The houses are square and well-made with walls of broad, split
planks covered with mud (figs. 811-812). The roofs are steeply
thatched and pyramidal, or have a short ridge along which broken
pots are laid after the manner of tiles. The frame-work differs from
that described in the last chapter in having cross-pieces laid between
[354] the plates. There are no chimneys, the smoke is allowed to seep
through the thatch, keeping out vermin and making the roofs steam
like a clam-bake.

From Cancuc the road falls slowly away, then it climbs to the steep side of the ridge and at last dips precipitously to a covered bridge over a narrow ravine. All along on both sides little corn-fields alternate with second growth. Ahead, the same great palisade that we saw from Tenango rises in a green wall, patched with fields and broken here and there by outcrops of cliffs and hanging valleys. We passed a dribbling of traffic, Indians on foot, and at the bridge met a family of Mexicans noisily eating a picnic lunch. The ravine was deep, rock-walled, with a roaring stream in the shadows of the bottom. From the other side of it, the palisade rose immediately, looking almost perpendicular and indefinitely high to us as we contemplated it. The road assumed a stiff grade, rising in a series of zig-zags that gained painfully to the top. Straight up, almost like a ruled line, lay the Indian trail, taking no account of the twists and turns of the road. Our carriers from Cancuc, who took on the cargo that the Tenango men had carried the day before, had gone up that fearsome climb. We tried it, but the horses slid and fell back on their haunches, and we ourselves could barely keep our footing. So we continued along the road, turning and turning, seeming never to gain, and fearing that our animals would never make it. The heat of the sun was thrown back by the hillside and the road.

We toiled on. Low growth and brush on the side of the road gave no shade. The dust rose high. The air, for all the heat, began to have a pleasant crispness that reminded us of high altitudes in other countries. Then we smelt a familiar smell which we ignored until its persistent recurrence forced us to look, see, and believe—that blackberries grow wild in Chiapas! The event of the next hours amused Lazaro greatly, for here in Mexico we found ourselves among familiar northern flowers and wild fruits, buttercups, dandelions, wild roses, blackberries, strawberries, all strange to him. We passed an Indian farm, stuck into a tiny hanging valley, where peach trees and alligator pears were growing together in the corn-field.

At the top of the pass in a shallow V-shaped cut, the barometer read 2,100 meters, a climb of 600 meters—about 1,900 feet—in two hours.

The country changed beyond here to steep ravines, high cliffs, rushing, cold brooks, and tall, dark fir trees clothing the rocks. The tilled fields disappeared, the scattered houses, and stick fences. It was a wild, shaggy country—a perfect setting, we thought, for the home of the rough Tenejapeños that we had seen along the road.

Near evening, a road forked off to the right, leading to a split in a wall of high cliffs through which we could see, already dark with

361 Amatenango lies in an open valley. It is estimated at three
342 hundred houses, each in a fenced yard of good size, and shaded with
351 fruit trees. The houses are large and well built, of mud and grass
• 245 thatch, with porches. The small church and Town Hall are tiled-
346 roof and stuccoed. The fields, which lie close around the town, and
344 the gardens in the town itself are watered by a stream brought down
241 a very pretty, roaring flume from higher land behind the village.
312 The irrigation system is fairly elaborate, and is unique in this area
as far as we know.

323 The pottery, which is their chief product, is almost all of one
shape, a sphere, with three handles and a narrow bottle-neck with a
flat lip. The decoration does not vary. Both shape and design, how-

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FIG. 883—Tenejapa, Chi. Indians at the Town Hall.

323 ever, are of considerable charm. The polish is fine and smooth, giving
an even golden-red colour all over, with the decoration in a deep,
reddish brown. No such fine, finished work is done by other tribes in
the area. The pots are baked by placing them on a rectangle of
boards, two or more meters square, around a hot fire. The woman
in charge turns them until they are done (fig. 883). These pots are
[443] carried by the men as far as San Cristóbal, where they are redis-
[442] tributed, and to Nenton in Guatemala. Their industry is sufficient
to enable them to maintain mules for carrying their goods, although
both men and beasts are equally loaded.